

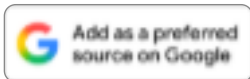
OPINION

PREMIUM

BUTI MANAMELA | The University of Ekurhuleni must be built — and built properly

More than just a vanity project for one metro, it is an investment in the industrial, technological and human capabilities South Africa needs

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Buti Manamela



President Cyril Ramaphosa announced plans for the establishment of a new university in Ekurhuleni during his state of the nation address in 2020. (ESA ALEXANDER)

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As public attention returns to Ekurhuleni, so too will questions [about the university promised](#) to its people. Those questions are justified. The proposed University of Ekurhuleni was announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa [in 2020](#) as a new institution focused on science and innovation. Six years later, there is no completed campus, no formally established university and no enrolled student.

Communities are therefore entitled to ask what happened, whether government has a credible plan and whether the dates now being discussed can be trusted. The answer to public suspicion cannot be another slogan. It must be regular, verifiable progress.

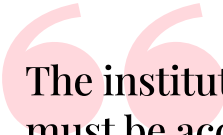
The honest account is that the project lost time. Early feasibility work established the strategic and academic case for a university and developed proposals for its size, shape and academic focus. However, it did not settle every question required to establish and fund a new public institution.

A final site was not approved, infrastructure requirements and costs were not completed, and capital funding was not secured. The statutory process required to establish a university was not concluded. That is the honest account.

Earlier public statements did not always distinguish clearly between the completion of particular studies and the completion of the whole feasibility process. This created an impression that the project was closer to implementation than it was.

Financial pressures across the post-school education and training system compounded the delay. This does not excuse slow progress, but it explains why a proposed construction start in 2025 could not be sustained.

The project has now been reactivated. I met the executive mayor of Ekurhuleni, [Nkosindiphile Xhakaza](#), in March, and the programme steering committee has been reconstituted. Government is proceeding on two connected tracks. The first is the development of the permanent university.



The institution must be legally established, programmes must be accredited, funding must be available and agreements on staffing, admissions, facilities and the awarding of qualifications must be concluded. We will not compromise academic quality or bypass the law to meet an announced date.

Four possible parcels of land in the Boksburg area have been identified, three owned by the City of Ekurhuleni and one by the national department of public works and infrastructure. Their technical, environmental, transport and infrastructure suitability must now be assessed.

The final feasibility, development and funding plan is scheduled for completion by March 2027. Concept designs are planned for the following year, with permanent-campus construction targeted to begin in 2029, subject to the required approvals and funding through the appropriate national infrastructure processes.

The second track examines whether limited academic activity can begin before the permanent campus is completed.

The current accelerated proposal is for a small second-semester intake in 2027, potentially using existing facilities at the [Denel Technical Academy](#) and

working with the [University of Johannesburg](#) as an academic partner. A higher certificate linked to aerospace engineering is among the programmes being considered.

This is a target, not a guarantee. The institution must be legally established, programmes must be accredited, funding must be available and agreements on staffing, admissions, facilities and the awarding of qualifications must be concluded. We will not compromise academic quality or bypass the law to meet an announced date.

Why, then, persist?

Because Ekurhuleni is not simply another location seeking a university of its own. It is one of South Africa's most important industrial centres: home to advanced manufacturing, aviation, logistics, engineering and the [OR Tambo International Airport](#) economic ecosystem. Yet it remains the only major metropolitan municipality without a public university headquartered within its boundaries.

The proposed institution is being designed around six areas of national importance:

- smart manufacturing;
- aerospace and related engineering;
- information and communications technology;
- green energy;
- smart transport and logistics; and
- technology-driven agro-processing.

Its proposed dual model would combine academic learning with structured workplace experience. Factories, laboratories, logistics platforms and technology enterprises would become part of the learning environment. Graduates should leave not only with qualifications, but with practical experience and stronger prospects of employment or entrepreneurship.

That is why this cannot be treated as a vanity project for Ekurhuleni. It must contribute to rebuilding the country's industrial capabilities, expanding the engineering and technology skills pipeline and creating stronger links between universities and the productive economy.

There are still difficult decisions ahead. Funding is constrained. The sequencing is demanding. The statutory and accreditation requirements are real.

Government must report honestly as these milestones are reached or missed. The steering committee and its legal, academic, infrastructure and funding workstreams must maintain structured engagement with the municipality, industry and affected communities.

The University of Ekurhuleni will not be built by slogans. But neither should it be defeated by cynicism.

It must be built, and built properly.

- *Manamela is the minister of higher education and training*